

The Peoples' Gallery of Cambridge
by Greg Hill, 2016

By 1970, Trout Fishing In America (TFIA) free school found it financially difficult to maintain both its Prospect St. and Broadway locations. Since I hoped to set up a darkroom at 188 Prospect St. for photo instruction and display, I offered to maintain it as an adjunct of TFIA, with the ground floor storefront as exhibit space, and the basement for cooperative darkroom use. The TFIA Board of Directors approved my proposal.

Since 1966, I had been pursuing the art of photography, inspired in part by Michelangelo Antonioni's landmark film *Blow-Up!* I was assembling a B&W portfolio, setting up random darkrooms wherever I happened to be living. I was still pursuing this vision in 1970—but my passion now was to also teach photography. Here was the perfect setting.

This “Peoples Gallery” would be run on a cooperative basis, like TFIA, and under TFIA's non-profit charter. I started recruiting members for this new venture. TFIA was my model and inspiration. And like TFIA, we'd set membership dues at \$10 month, to go towards rent, utilities, maintenance, and darkroom supplies. PG members would rotate various Gallery responsibilities. In the beginning only three of us, Lewis Rosen, Janet Lord and myself, tenuously nursed the Gallery through its initial growing pains.

PG engaged Marvin “Brahma Karma” Johnson of the Walrus Woodworking Collective in Boston to build our basement darkroom, complete with a huge waterproof sink, sump pump and a mounted ventilation system to exhaust chemical fumes to the outside. Marvin was joined by Tim Laput of the WWC, who also became a Gallery member. (WWC also specialized in working with local potters and weavers to create reduced-cost pottery kick wheels and floor looms). I outfitted the darkroom with my own enlarger and processing equipment—tanks, trays, dryers, tongs, etc.

We coated the large darkroom wooden sink with waterproof epoxy-based Insl-Tile, and secured the PVC-based sink drainage. The finished darkroom accommodated both B&W film and print processing. A powerful ventilation fan exhausted the fumes from the darkroom—we were vigilant about those noxious fumes. The darkroom was completed by the fall of 1970.

It became apparent that our expenses outstripped our meager dues, so via member Janet Pilgrim, we sublet our ground-floor storefront in December 1970 to Ecology Action, a local environmental advocacy group, to help with upkeep and expenses. We witnessed EA member Gifford Booth erecting a scale geodesic dome on the Boston Common, during Earth Day, 1970.



By the late spring of 1971, we had enough members to sustain our enterprise in full; Ecology Action relocated to other quarters. We doggedly removed the ugly street-level linoleum blocks with dried ice and chisels, sanded the floor and applied a polyurethane finish—with neighborhood kids giving us a hand!





Now our darkroom classes and monthly exhibits began in earnest. We conducted monthly meetings, photo critiques and held weekly Folk Nights, featuring various local performers. I continued to teach basic photo classes; we began exhibiting members' photos in the Gallery space in May, 1971. We instituted Gallery Watch, with members volunteering to Gallery-sit during our open hours, and a photo-books lending-library in the basement.

Gallery members also partook of "Photo Nights" at architect Paul Donnelly's apartment, next door to the Gallery, in 1971. These featured offbeat gatherings, where the wassail flowed, and we photographed one another, and our reflections, from a huge mirror on the floor.





Photo techniques and ideas were freely exchanged. Along with Paul, PG members Garie Crawford, Bill King, Frank Fichera, and myself were regulars.

The Food Co-op had a strong presence in Cambridge; it was set up to bypass local supermarkets. In 1971 the Food Co-op desperately needed bi-weekly distribution space. Many PG members were also Co-op members and felt a strong kinship with it; we voted to let the Co-op distribute produce from the Gallery--on a provisional basis. That translated to large crates of produce dominating the ground floor exhibit space, twice a week. Some members felt uneasy with this, considering it a deviation from the Gallery's original mission. This arrangement began in the fall of 1971, with the Co-op paying the Gallery a modest fee.

PG members volunteered to photo-document the operation of the Nesenkeag Co-op Farm in Litchfield, southern NH, (from whence came the Co-op's vegetable produce) for an upcoming edition of the Co-op Farm *Manual*. (The presence of Ecology Action must have been an influence). We traversed the Farm, capturing its operations.





In 1971, the Farm planted and maintained up to fifteen acres of vegetables, applying organic practices by feeding crops compost, manure and organic rock fertilizers. (Nesenkeag Farm still thrives today, growing organic produce and supplying many Massachusetts restaurants with their fare).

A TFIA friend furnished the Co-op with a monstrous 1953 Ford flatbed truck (that needed a new muffler, exhaust manifold and a tune-up, adding up to \$300 for repairs) to haul produce down weekly from NH. Parked in back of the Gallery, it was a looming presence. The truck was ably serviced by a Co-op driver and mechanic. Unfortunately, Co-op produce distribution did prove a real challenge to the Gallery's operation, with too much messy produce in too small a space.

Eventually, we created a Food Co-op Exhibit at the Gallery, co-sponsored by the Food Co-op. The photos from that exhibit wound up gracing the next edition of the *Farm Manual*.

PG was not a paragon of cooperation, experiencing its own unique host of problems. Many members simply weren't used to working in a cooperative setting. The darkroom was often left a mess, and items got "borrowed" from it. Gallery Watch suffered no-shows, and some chores failed to get done. PG stalwarts were often taxed to pull up the slack, and recriminations often ensued. So, PG organized a Core Committee to meet weekly to deal with all these dilemmas. Somehow, the Gallery survived. And in Central Square, an enterprise billing itself as the Cambridge Photo Co-op sprang up—imitation was the sincerest form of flattery!

In 1971, I gave my father, a conservative Yankee from New Hampshire, a tour of the Gallery. Afterwards, I said to him cockily, "Well, Dad, what do you think of our co-op experiment?" "Interesting," he replied, "but are your members *insured*?" We all got a big guffaw out of that--until two of our cameras got stolen a few months later. And they weren't insured, of course. Sometimes, father does know best.

Also in 1971, PG added a new dimension to its repertoire, with the arrival of graphic artist John Blumberg to teach the art of photo-silkscreen.



Many eagerly signed up for his class, and WWC adapted part of the basement space to accommodate this new medium. Some of John's own silkscreen works were exhibited at the Gallery.

PG women members began to organize a Women's Exhibit at the Gallery. There was always a strong Gallery feminist presence. We were already processing B&W film for Boston-based Female Liberation, which published *No More Fun And Games: A Journal of Female Liberation* in 1970. Members Susan Dixon, Ellen Engelson, Ann Morse, Gail Osherenko, Ellen Roth, Garie Crawford, and others methodically organized this exhibit with their relevant works, running from April 30 to May 12, 1972.

The spring of 1972 also witnessed the arrival of two unique exhibitors, PG member Bob Lyons and photo-sculptor Allan Gittler. Gittler's unique photo-sculptures were exhibited at the Gallery from April 1 to 15, 1972.

ALLAN GITTLER
PHOTOGRAPHIC SCULPTURE
AND MOVIE EXHIBIT



PRESENTED AT THE
PEOPLE'S GALLERY
188 PROSPECT STREET, CAMBRIDGE
SATURDAY APRIL FIRST, 7 PM
THRU APRIL FOURTEENTH

He was also a film editor, artist, novelist and inventor of the experimental minimalist Fishbone “Gittler Guitar.” Andy Summers of the new wave English rock band Police played a Gittler Fishbone on his “Synchronicity II” video. Both the MOMA and the MFA have Gittler guitars in their collections. Gittler also screened an experimental short film during this exhibit.

PG member Bob Lyons, who taught an Advanced Photo workshop at PG, curated his own exhibit at the Gallery, May 13 – 16, 1972. Lyons went on to a distinguished career in photography, [holding many fellowships] and authoring two notable books on Africa. Another Africa, co-authored with African writer Chinua Achebe, was an exploration of the authentic Africa, beyond Western stereotypes. Intimate Enemy, with co-author Scott Straus, was an unflinching look at the unspeakable Rwanda genocides begun in 1994. Gallery members David Cohn and Bill King also had solo exhibits in 1971.

During 1972, a boycott of the Polaroid Corporation was taking place. In 1970, two black Polaroid employees, Ken Williams and Caroline Hunter, had discovered that Polaroid was supplying the apartheid South African government with film for its ID-II Passbook system. Williams and Hunter campaigned publicly to expose this complicity with apartheid and were subsequently fired. Some PG members, including myself, invited Ken Williams to debate a Polaroid spokesman at the Gallery.

Accordingly, the Gallery membership voted to support the Polaroid Boycott. The unmasked presence of Polaroid in South Africa was a stark revelation to many of us. We demanded that certain photography schools in greater Boston make public their stand on the boycott. (Some Gallery members were

devotees of the Polaroid film process; Polaroid itself was based in Waltham, MA). An uproar ensued from this action, and PG members enrolled at the Imageworks photo school in Cambridge were confronted by instructors about the demand.

Shocked, these PG members sent disclaimers to the various schools, claiming the Gallery did not fully endorse the boycott. This created an irreparable split in the membership and exacerbated the rift between those members who subscribed to the notion of photography as a solitary art form, and those who advocated for its powers of social import. Subsequently, I and other members resigned from the PG in June 1972 to more actively participate in the Polaroid Boycott.

According to a 1980 article in *Views, a New England Journal of Photography*, a new group of photographers arrived at the PG in 1973, changing its name to the Prospect Street Gallery (PSG). “Dave Ulrich, another Minor White adherent, and Marie Bustard (now director of Boris Color Labs in Boston) joined Arnold Lerner in revitalizing the gallery, darkroom and classroom aspects of the Co-op.” Interestingly, “a division remained between members of the Co-op who wanted a *self-directed group and members who wanted a 'public' gallery*...Co-op activities included film series, critiques and classes.” (emphasis added) And shows “...were reviewed consistently by the *Boston Globe*.”

But as with PG—and TFIA—money was still a major concern; on 5/11/72, a member lamented, “...still that \$300 gas bill.” And other typical PG problems haunted the new venue. An entry in the PSG log book by member Karl, on 12/11/72, read:

Thursday last (12-7-72) I came down here about 1:30 pm. The heater was cooking the basement...The basement lights were on. And the print dryer was still plugged in and drying nothing. Evidently 'everything' was left from the Wednesday night Basic class. SHAME.

But the PSG gamely carried on a prime mission of their space—to exhibit the works of photographers. Deac Rossell, the unsparing photo critic of the *Boston Globe*, described in a July 31, 1973 review, the process of an open exhibit at the facility:

3:40 p.m. - Five and a half hours in gallery. Doldrums. Walls 2/3rds filled, and Ulrich has forgotten to get any sales prices from anyone...Five exquisite prints from Randy Matusow are accepted and drastically change the mood on the walls. Emotionally strong and technically superior...

5:39 p.m. - People drifting in again after a violent rainstorm. More documentary photographs. Too many street vendors, figures slouched in doorways and facades of inner-city buildings. Note: most prints too dark. Easiest way to get arty looking print and cover any flaws. Dark gives fake richness only at surface. Impossible to see into the print.

10:12 pm – 41 prints on the walls. 2 in the window. 38 photographers submitted more than 250 prints. Most work brought in was a medley, with few portfolios taking a subject, mood or style and exploring it exclusively and thoroughly. And with por-

traits, still lifes, abstracts and color work, the show reflects the medley of submissions.

While Rossell's slightly jaundiced eye could be a tad harsh on a PSG open exhibit, this critic had nothing but praise for the PSG exhibit of photographer Mark C. Orlove, in a *Boston Globe* review of January 19, 1973:

Orlove...makes such a forceful debut with his work, and surprising again, because the style and content of the show exists so completely within the classic tradition of modern view-camera photography... Orlove presents rocky coastline, jagged mountains, weather-grained wood, in a tradition shaped and defined by a score of photographers from Weston to White, yet he does so with an intensely personal eyew and a mastery of printer's craft.

By 1977, according to *Views*, the now-named Cambridge Photo Co-op experienced ongoing hassles...

Tensions between the cooperative and the public factions of the Co-op increased until [Dave] Ulrich left, replaced by a third wave of photographers, including core members Geoff Aronsen and Steve Stone. Exhibits, lectures, film presentations, classes and rental darkroom service continued, along with the ongoing problems of participation. Members were not as interested in volunteering their time but joined simply to use the darkroom or gallery. Work was left in the hands of a few people whose energies were finally, exhausted.

The Cambridge Photo Co-op closed in December 1979.

In retrospect, while the PG was a pioneering experiment, our membership was overwhelmingly white and middle class. We had the opportunity to open our unique venue to working-class kids in Cambridge, to teach them photography as a personal vision, and I greatly regret we didn't.

Though the Gallery was one step removed from TFIA, it carried on in like spirit. Without Brautigan's book, there would've been no TFIA free school. And without TFIA, there would've been no Peoples Gallery. The wonderful anarchy of TFIA the book was reflected in the unschooled but fascinating photos that rank amateurs created from our basic photo classes. I still proudly retain one of those photos from a grateful former student, a faded print of a murkily melting candle, and the inscription on the back, "To Greg – Live in Light! Les."

Gregory W. Hill